

# **\*\*ATTENTION\*\***

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# Cowlitz River Cutthroat

**Department of Game cutthroat trout plants should provide interesting action on the Cowlitz this fall.**

**by Terry Rudnick**

**L**ooking for some good fall fishing? The Cowlitz River just might have what you're looking for. If things go as anticipated, the Cowlitz should provide excellent fishing for sea-run cutthroat trout this fall.

The reason for all the optimism is that the Department of Game is planting more and larger cutthroat into the Cowlitz system, and it's the returning adult cutthroat from these plants that will provide a bulk of the fishing action.

Returns of hatchery cutthroat were good last year, and they should be a lot better this year, according to Jack Tipping, a Department of Game fish biologist who heads up the Cowlitz cutthroat program out of the department's Cowlitz Trout Hatchery.

The adult cutthroat returning to the hatchery this fall were planted as smolts last spring, and that plant was the biggest ever, totalling more than 110,000 fish. That's twice the number planted in 1983, which provided good cutthroat fishing last year (See table 1).

Not only were a lot more fish planted this year, but they were also larger, and that makes the fall fishing picture even brighter. Tipping's studies on Cowlitz cutthroat show that larger smolts provide a much better

return of adult fish. Smolts planted when they're under 8.3 inches long return at rates of something like 2 to 2 1/2 percent, while up to 14 percent of the adults return when smolts of 8.3 inches or larger are planted. More adult cutthroat returning to the hatchery means more fish for Cowlitz River anglers. Smolts planted in 1983 averaged a little under eight inches long, while those planted this year averaged nearly 8 1/2 inches.

Tipping and Cowlitz Hatchery manager Roy Rathvon can achieve larger smolt size by feeding the fish more to "push" their growth. The fish are not held longer in hatchery ponds to allow them to grow larger. All young cutthroat are kept at the hatchery for about 16 months, from when the eggs are taken in December until they are released as smolts a year from the following April.

Cutthroat that return to the hatchery as adults the fall after they're planted are called "initial migrants," and they make up a high percentage of the fall return. These first-time returnees range from 12 to 15 inches in length. There should be thousands of these first-time returnees in the Cowlitz this fall, because of the huge, 110,000-fish plant last spring.

"Repeat migrants" are fish that

were planted a year and a half ago, so they're a year older than the initial migrants. These are the lunkers of the sea-run family, ranging from 15 to 20 inches long and averaging 16 to 17 inches. Most, but not all, of these repeat migrants spawned the previous year.

On most Washington streams, the daily catch limit allows anglers to keep no more than three trout per day over 14 inches long, but that three-over-14 limit doesn't apply on the Cowlitz. An angler may take eight trout over 10 inches, and it's okay if all are over 14 inches, as long as no more than two of them exceed 20 inches.

If you have fished the Cowlitz for winter steelhead or spring Chinook salmon, you'll know that these fisheries draw some large crowds, but that's not the case with sea-run cutthroat. There's usually plenty of room along the river in October and November, when cutthroat fishing is at its best.

Adult cutthroat, like steelhead, return to the Cowlitz Trout Hatchery via Blue Creek, so the mouth of the

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creek is a good cutthroat fishing spot. There is a lot of good fishing water at the creek mouth, and there's plenty of bank access. A trail leads to the mouth of the creek from the parking lot at the trout hatchery boat launch, about half a mile away.

The area just off the trout hatchery boat launch is also good for sea-run cutthroat. This long, flat drift gives up a lot of fish to anglers who cast spoons, spinners or artificial flies, and it can be fished from the bank as well as from a boat.

The lower reaches of the Cowlitz provide some good cutthroating possibilities, and one of the more popular spots is near the mouth of Olequa Creek. It's located a few miles upstream from the mouth of the Toutle River, between the Toutle mouth and the Interstate 5 bridge over the Cowlitz. This is primarily a boat-fishing spot.

Wherever you choose to fish for cutthroat, remember that these little anadromous trout are extremely fond of submerged stumps, log jams, sunken trees and other wood or brush cover. These spots with lots of limbs and brush are real tackle-grabbers, but they're often extremely productive.

Speaking of tackle, you can fish for Cowlitz River sea-runs with a wide range of rods and reels. Your standard trout gear will work fine, as will a lightweight steelhead outfit. Anglers use monofilament lines ranging from

four- to 12-pound test, but six- or eight-pound is probably best suited to this kind of fishing.

Nightcrawlers are the top sea-run cutthroat bait, and that's what most Cowlitz River anglers use. They can be fished by themselves, with nothing more than a size 6 or 8 worm hook and a sinker, or they can be fished behind a small spinner, such as a Colorado or Indiana style. Worms are especially good in small pockets of holding water and other tight places where it's hard to fish an artificial lure.

Small spoons and spinners account for many Cowlitz River sea-runs. Use the weighted styles, which will go to the bottom even in fairly deep water. These lures are easiest to fish in medium-depth drifts where there is moderate current to help keep the lures working. Spoons and spinners also take a lot of cutthroat from around boulders and other mid-stream current breaks, and they'll also pull fish from undercut banks, another favorite sea-run haunt.

If you'd rather catch your trout on artificial flies than on bait or hardware, you'll have little trouble taking Cowlitz cutthroat. Fly fishing can be very good, especially early in the fall, before the rains cause the river to swell with runoff. Streamer patterns, like the Muddler Minnow and Mickey Finn, work well, as do many of the brightly colored wet-fly patterns that produce for steelhead anglers. □

**TABLE 1**

**Cowlitz River Sea-Run Cutthroat Plants and Returns**

Year	Smolt Length	Number Planted	Return To Hatchery
1981	7.99 inches	39,300	4,577
1982	8.54 inches	60,600	6,103
1983	7.99 inches	55,100	3,286
1984	8.42 inches	110,600	?

The above table compares cutthroat smolt plants and returns for the Cowlitz River during the past four years. More, and bigger, smolts planted this spring should provide excellent returns this fall, which is good news for anglers.